

Decolonising Political Modernity

From Ocean to Museum

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By

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INTRODUCTION

Colonial Modernity

The last five centuries, and counting, have been shaped by colonial modernity, understood as an era of colonialism, capitalism and racism. Its symbolic starting point came when the Genoese explorer Christopher Columbus made landfall in the Caribbean in 1492, claiming islands for his Castilian sponsors and turning already inhabited territory into property. This was a ‘New World’ only from a European perspective. Caribbean and South American colonisation consolidated a system first established by Portugal’s trading forays along Africa’s West Coast and enslaving Africans to work sugar plantations on the islands of Madeira and São Tomé (Moore 2009; Cruz *et al* 2023). The exploitation unleashed by this process marks the world to this day. Taking colonial modernity as its starting point, this book sets out to explore why racism and nationalism continue to plague societies, with a particular focus on British society. It is a decolonial project in that it seeks to understand and undermine some of the foundational assumptions governing contemporary politics that find their source in colonial modernity. The book begins by interrogating rather than assuming ethnonationalist identifiers and political frameworks. It goes on to question knowledge paradigms informed by European colonialism and its attendant racism. The book then explores alternative ways of imagining belonging derived from oceanic thinking and inspired by an ‘ethos of living otherwise’ (Shilliam 2015, 8).

Growing up in 1980s Scotland, I was never particularly interested in history, but I did imbibe a link between the year 1492 and Christopher Columbus ‘discovering’ a New World. I was vaguely aware of other ‘great explorers’ like Vasco da Gama and Ferdinand Magellan, whose feats of navigation helped establish trading routes that brought the world’s riches to Europe, and I did a project about Captain Cook’s voyage to Oceania on the ship *Endeavour* at school. However, I did not think about the people who were already living in those countries across the seas, the impact of Europeans on indigenous civilisations, and the potential for cross-fertilisation. Neither did I consider what peoples on the Atlantic’s western and eastern seaboard first learned about each other:

On February 12, 1545, a delegation of Maya chiefs, in full Q'eqchi' regalia, presented Prince Philip with treasures showing the richness of their lands. Along with two thousand quetzal feathers sent by the chiefs of Tuzulutlan, the gifts included beautiful clay pots and fruit platters, as well as Mexican foods and plants: chiles, beans, maize, and "containers of whisked chocolate." This is the first recorded example of drinking chocolate in Europe, and it was carried to the court—and presumably prepared—by Native people. (Dodds Pennock 2020, 797)

I never had cause to imagine such a delegation of Mayan chiefs and all they had to offer. It was not conjured for me in class, nor did I come across it as part of popular culture. Drinking chocolate, so common today, came from the Americas and was brought to Europe in those early years of colonisation, after the 1494 Treaty of Tordesillas had divided the world between Castile (part of today's Spain) and Portugal (Norton 2006). Other foodstuffs that are now part of most European diets, such as sweetcorn and chillies, were unknown in Europe, and entered Asia through Spain's colonisation of the Philippines. Cooks in what is Italy today did not know of the tomato. Potatoes, indigenous to South America, enabled the population of Europe to grow because they were so nourishing. When the potato was first brought to Europe, it was considered a bizarre novelty that people initially refused to eat. In time, however, European dependence on it became so great that crop failure led to Ireland's mid-nineteenth century famine, in turn setting in train large-scale emigration to the so-called 'New World'.

Europeans soon assessed the riches of the countries they encountered, and with it the potential for exploitation on an enormous scale. Early English colonists and adventurers made alliances with native populations a matter of convenience. For example, the Elizabethan privateer and navigator Francis Drake (c. 1540-1596) engaged in African slave trading. However, in an apparent spirit of camaraderie, he also worked with Cimarrons (Africans who had escaped enslavement) to steal from their Spanish masters in Panama in 1572 (Morgan 2003, 13). Going by the previous experience of Columbus on the island of Hispaniola and elsewhere in the West Indies, English would-be colonisers of North America in the late sixteenth century saw their interests best served by allying with apparently 'gentle' indigenous peoples against perceived 'Cannibals,' so named more for their hostility to conquest than their actual consumption of human flesh (Morgan 2003, 21). Just as described in Thomas More's *Utopia*, the English fully expected the good-natured native inhabitants to cede land and work it in return for protection from their enemies and the promised benefits of Christianity and civilisation (Morgan 2003, 23).

Colonisation of the Americas had a devastating effect on the native population through systematic expropriation, enslavement and ethnic cleansing. The native population of North America alone fell by an estimated 95% in the four centuries to 1900, due to a combination of conquest and disease (Hall 2010, 72). Indigenous Americans were put to work in mines and on plantations. For example, as Taino people succumbed *en masse* to disease and overwork across the Caribbean, and despite resistance from Caribs, after whom the region was named, these indigenous populations were largely, though not completely, displaced and replaced (Hulme 2000; Feliciano-Santos 2017). England realised very quickly that it would need more labour power to extract the largest possible profits from these new territories. Barbados was one of the first Caribbean islands it colonised in 1627, at the same time as Ireland's ongoing colonisation. Indentured labourers were brought from England and Ireland to fell Barbados's forest and work its fields. They were generally so poor that their best option was to bind themselves to a work contract in return for passage, in the hope of eventually buying land to make their fortune in the Caribbean. This system was soon replaced by the wholesale importation of enslaved Africans to sugar plantations, but would return with Britain's abolition of slavery in the 1830s and the exploitation of Chinese and Indian labourers from other parts of its Empire instead.

Throughout the eighteenth century, enslaved Africans grew the sugar that Britons put in their tea, which was itself imported from Asia. Sugar was a hugely profitable product that was also used to make rum, a staple of sailors' rations (Blackburn 1996, 3). This was a time when Britain was developing its naval capacities, and the triangular trade became established. Raw materials were grown in the Caribbean and increasingly in Britain's thirteen colonies, which would become the United States of America. Britain turned them into manufactured goods, some of which would be shipped from the likes of London, Liverpool and Bristol to trade for enslaved Africans, who would then make the horrendous journey across the Atlantic to live an often short life of toil and suffering in the Americas (Blackburn 1996, 7). Ever more slaves were needed since the death rate was so high. Together, Britain and other European colonisers transported an estimated twelve million enslaved people across the Atlantic over several centuries. The scale of this commerce is hard to fathom, but it helped fuel Britain's industrial revolution, among others. And yet, when I learned about the Industrial Revolution in school, I do not remember encountering any of this history. I learned about the 'Spinning Jenny' and other innovations that made the manufacturing process more efficient during the so-called Age of Improvement from the mid-eighteenth to nineteenth centuries, thereby

bringing progress and development to Britain. However, I was not taught that many agricultural improvements were financed by landlords grown wealthy from their Caribbean plantations (Berg and Hudson 2023, 134).

The historians Maxine Berg and Pat Hudson (2023, 5) note that '[m]ost major works on the industrial revolution since the 1980s have ignored slavery and plantations altogether,' a critique they extend to school and university history curricula as well as contemporary textbooks. For example, they note that British-made, rough, woollen 'Penistone' cloth was sold to be made into clothing and blankets for enslaved people labouring in the West Indies. The Crossleys of Penistone in Yorkshire were also slaveholders in Jamaica who benefited from emancipation compensation (Berg and Hudson 2023, 147). A sample swatch of blue Penistone cloth, complete with a label lauding its qualities for 'negro clothing', was recently discovered and formed the centrepiece of an exhibit at the 2023 British textile Biennial in Blackburn, Lancashire. The records show that 410 yards were purchase by an English slaveowner to supply enslaved Africans toiling in Barbados. In turn, British manufacturing techniques were geared towards the long strands of Atlantic, *Barbadense* cotton, named after that island. The success of Hargreaves' Spinning Jenny and Arkwright's water wheel relied on this cotton's particular attributes (Berg and Hudson 2023, 153). These threads connecting Britain's textile industry to the plantations were never followed during my schooling. Similarly, Ambrose Crowley's pioneering ironworks on the outskirts of Newcastle manufactured iron implements specifically for plantations (Berg and Hudson 2023, 88), but the industrial revolution's debt to enslaved Africans was never made plain to me. Fragments like the rediscovered Penistone cloth allow exhibitions like the one in Blackburn, subtitled 'from the Pennines to Barbados and beyond,' to highlight this history. They also bear witness to the racism underpinning the plantation system, and begin to explain its enduring legacy (Global Threads, 2023).

Racism

It is very difficult to get the measure of racism, let alone address it, without understanding its historical origins. Racism does not ultimately come down to the colour of a person's skin. Rather, it is principally about power. If we try to tackle racism's current manifestations without exploring its historical ramifications, then it will be well-nigh impossible to dismantle. Silencing the past is partly why racism is so hard to undermine, since this serves to keep the very foundations of racial thinking unclear. It is well established

that racism is a social construct, but how did it come about? To answer that question, we must return to Barbados in the seventeenth century and understand the need plantation owners felt to protect themselves from the enslaved Africans who vastly outnumbered them and thus embodied the threat of revolt. Plantation owners started to use skin colour to distinguish themselves from the enslaved, who had begun to adopt Christianity and could no longer be 'Othered' as 'heathen.' Therefore, whiteness and blackness were invented, among other racialised categories, to maintain hierarchies of power in Europe's Caribbean colonies. The concept of whiteness as a projection of power is crucial to any understanding of racism. Consequently, this book is 'interested in something more potent and real than the white face, that is, in white power' (Baldwin 1998 [1949], 81).

When Britons hear about slavery, it is often in the context of its abolition rather than what had gone before. Chiefly remembered is the abolitionist Member of Parliament William Wilberforce (1759-1833), who was but one public figure in a multifaceted and long-lasting campaign (Brown 2012; Gwyn 2012; Hamilton 2010; Wood 2010). We hear much less about formerly enslaved African abolitionists like Olaudah Equiano and Ignatius Sancho, who were also living in Georgian Britain and whose work also made an important contribution to bringing about abolition. Even more seldom discussed are the many, many people all across the United Kingdom (UK) who were profiting from slavery and did not want it to end (Taylor, M. 2020; Devine 2015). The British slave trade did end in 1807, and Britain began enforcing its decision on other countries, but British slavery itself was not abolished until 1833. At the time, Britain paid huge sums in compensation to former enslavers according to the number of people they had 'owned', and nothing to the enslaved. Instead, the newly emancipated were subjected to a further five year period of unpaid 'apprenticeship,' after which many of them had few other options than to keep working for their former masters. Neither did the end of slavery bring an end to racism, because even abolitionists, those who would not put sugar in their tea because they understood the link between the plantation system and human exploitation, did not necessarily believe in racial equality.

Abolitionists tended to believe that when enslaved people gained their freedom, they should continue to work the plantations. They would be paid wages, but the conditions would not be much better, and colonial modernity's capitalist system—a foundation stone of today's society—would remain unchanged (Hall 2002). Expecting formerly enslaved Africans to take on a transitional role as apprentices in order to 'learn' the hard labour they were already doing was both cynical and paternalistic. Historians have

argued that Britain ended the slave trade not primarily for humanitarian reasons, but because it was becoming uneconomical to maintain Caribbean planters' exclusive access to British markets. Eric Williams, prime minister of Trinidad and Tobago from 1962-81, made this argument during his doctoral studies at Oxford University in the 1930s. When he sought to publish the book derived from his dissertation, *Capitalism and Slavery* (1944), no British publisher would take it on because they felt his conclusions were too difficult, controversial and uncomfortable. And so it was published in the United States, sparking decades of debate among historians (Brown 2012, 15).

What does this history matter to current British politics? What are the legacies of Empire? The inhabitants of Britain's Caribbean colonies were brought up as British subjects with the right to come to Britain. For example, the term '*Windrush* generation' refers to a ship that arrived at London's Tilbury Docks from Jamaica in 1948, carrying British subjects who came to the 'motherland' after World War II to help rebuild the country, but who faced overt racism and discrimination on arrival. Some were returning, having served in the armed forces during the war. The Windrush scandal of 2018 revealed how Jamaicans who had been legally resident in Britain for decades fell foul of a 'hostile environment' to immigration and were deported or threatened with deportation, leading to the resignation of then UK home secretary Amber Rudd (Gentleman 2022a; El Enani 2020). This is one example of racial injustice that gained prominence, but many of its victims are still waiting for compensation and others died before any was paid. A subsequent review found that Home Office staff were largely ignorant of Britain's colonial history and should receive training. A research report written in response to one recommendation and entitled *the Historical Roots of the Windrush Scandal* was circulated internally but suppressed by the Home Office for three years before finally being made public following a transparency campaign and a court order. Perhaps it was suppressed because the report states that 'during the period 1950-1981, every single piece of immigration or citizenship legislation was designed at least in part to reduce the number of people with black or brown skin who were permitted to live and work in the UK' (Home Office Independent Report 2024, online; Guardian 2024b). Other review recommendations were slow to be implemented by a Home Office that only grew more hostile to asylum and immigration, as evidenced by the 2023 Illegal Immigration Act (Gentleman 2022b).

The phrase 'we are here because you were there,' attributed to the Sri Lankan essayist and activist Ambalavaner Sivanandan, encapsulates the

intimacy of Empire and the reason why Britain is a multicultural country today (Patel 2021). The appointment of a British Asian, Rishi Sunak, as UK prime minister from 2022-2024 does nothing in itself to resolve the ongoing injustices of Empire and institutional racism. The United Kingdom is a paradigmatic example of late colonial modernity, and in order to understand contemporary Britain, we need a well-rounded sense of history; ‘this is not the story of a mere episode in a marginal history; it is the integrated story of the making of the modern world itself’ (Scott, cited in Hall 2018, 10). The next section looks at what decolonising means in this context.

Decoloniality

Decolonising involves deep and challenging engagement with the imperial trappings of the Western canon, in which many academics and students in both (previously) colonising and colonised countries have been and continue to be educated. Decolonial approaches seek to incorporate different perspectives and make space for equal dialogue between them, highlighting the contribution of racialised and other minorities. Decolonising entails questioning and ‘unravelling’ (Saini and Begum 2020, 217) what makes canonical knowledge legitimate, the erasures and inequalities bound up with it, and the structural racism that perpetuates it. In so doing, the extent to which so-called ‘Western civilisation’ has been intertwined with and often dependent on economic, intellectual and sociocultural contributions from erstwhile colonies can be identified, traced and brought to the fore, together with other unacknowledged systems of thought and sources of knowledge. Decolonising pays attention to positionality, power differentials and the ‘loss, mutilation and marginalisation of bodies of knowledge’ (Gopal 2021, 20). As such, it should be reparative, meaning that it should make amends for historical wrongs through financial payments or other forms of assistance. This is a form of social justice, which seeks to ensure equitable treatment, access to resources and opportunities for all, and that societal structures and institutions do not favour some groups over others.

According to one of its founding scholars, Aníbal Quijano (2008, 181), decolonial theory is based on ‘the social classification of the world’s population around the idea of race, a mental construction that expresses the basic experience of colonial domination.’ This posits that Eurocentrism, capitalism and racism have proven more durable than colonialism itself, permeating societies and dominant knowledge systems to this day. Quijano models a homogenising social system of white supremacy emanating from Europe, beginning with the colonisation of the Americas and leading to a

racialised hierarchy of slavery, serfdom and waged labour. He demonstrates how the economic power of capital has been co-constitutive of European modernity, also understood to include the bourgeois family, the nation-state and Eurocentric rationality (Quijano 2008, 193). In comparable ways, non-European peoples were lumped together into broad categorisations, whose chief characteristics were deemed to be cultural inferiority and so-called 'backwardness.' This was understood to mean a lesser degree of advancement along a chronological continuum of development and progress than Europeans, leading to a mutually reinforcing duality, which persists today in the broad terms of 'the West' and 'the Rest' (Walker and Sakai 2019, 6). Although the racialised stratification of black Africans, indigenous inhabitants, *mestizos* and European whites did not take the same form in Asia as in the Americas, which Quijano was writing about, parallels can certainly be drawn with the colonial organisation of Chinese, Malay and Indian labour in British Malaya, for example, and the ethnic hierarchies between French, Vietnamese, Khmer and Lao in the colonial administration of French Indochina.

Extermination, exclusion and discrimination were the tools used to constrain and control colonial relations between racialised groups, and, according to Quijano (2008), these antecedents created power differentials that still characterise South and Central American democratic systems today. Quijano contends that as a result, many black and Indian citizens there have never been accorded full citizenship—or social justice—in the sense of equal, non-discriminatory access to citizenship rights and duties. This is certainly not confined to South America, since one enduring legacy of colonialism has been to spread racialised prejudice across the globe. Walter D. Mignolo (2008, 248), another foundational member of the Modernity-Coloniality-Decoloniality (MCD) school of thought, considers modernity and coloniality to have been co-constitutive phenomena for the last five hundred years, ever since the establishment of transatlantic commerce in the early sixteenth century. He draws attention to Quijano's distinction between colonialism and the continuing 'coloniality of power forced on non-European cultures that have remained silenced, hidden and absent' (Mignolo 2008, 240). This leads to Mignolo's (2008, 247) definition of decolonisation as 'to produce, transform, and disseminate knowledge that is not dependent on the epistemology of North Atlantic modernity.'

In a much-cited essay, Eve Tuck and K. Wayne Yang (2012) point out that decolonisation is not a metaphor, but an existential matter of land restitution for the indigenous inhabitants of settler colonies, such as those of North America, Australia and New Zealand. Consequently, Stephen Legg (2017,

347) suggests we ‘think not of ‘decolonising’ (unacquiring colonies), despite how clearly useful it has been to many scholars and activists, but of ‘decolonialism’ (challenging the practices that made colonies and which sustain colonial durabilities).’ That is, decolonialising is about upending deeply embedded thought patterns that posit ‘Western civilisation’ as superior and more advanced, and thus the most appropriate lens through which to view every other world culture. Such a critique cannot come from within, but must stand outside the coloniality of power in order to retrieve erased and absent knowledge. Mignolo (2008, 256) does not advocate cultural relativism, however, but rather what he calls ‘diversality,’ or a network of knowledge systems; ‘different colonial experiences have resulted in **diverse** (post) colonial situations and decolonial options’ (Lee, Liang and Mignolo 2015, 187; emphasis in original).

Walter Mignolo (2013, 4) states unequivocally that ‘there is no modernity without coloniality’. Furthermore, there is no coloniality without racialised hierarchies of power, the legacies of which continue to play out across institutions and disciplines today. Decolonising practice is deeply personal and self-reflective in that it challenges the Western-centric canon on which much academic knowledge is built and from which many scholars derive their claim to expertise. This can be profoundly destabilising, as erasures come to light and glaring gaps in the coverage of education systems are laid bare. Decolonial thinking entails initiating real dialogue between different worldviews and dismantling and rebalancing racialised hierarchies of knowledge, as reflected in school and university curricula, as well as colonially-inflected notions of which parts of the world are worthy of study (Singh 2018). Decolonial scholars try to be attuned to the ‘continual hum’ (Ashar 2015, 263) of colonial categories in contemporary discourse.

Exploring the interconnectedness of capitalist modernity, colonialism, racism and nationalism is not new, and adopting a decolonial approach does not equate to searching for precolonial alternatives to nationhood and the nation-state, for example (Ho, 2013). This would simply replicate the kind of essentialising analyses of non-Western identity and belonging that decoloniality tries to escape. Ways of ‘living other-wise’ (Shilliam 2015, 8) can also bring perspectives, insights and even cosmologies to the fore that continue to exist and evolve alongside colonial modernity (Chatterjee 2005). However, rather than seeing them as ‘anachronistic survivals, or as the representations of a more authentic and pristine past, they are a cluster of responses to the onslaught of capitalism, their traditions and cultures representing *not* a transhistorical primordial ‘essence,’ but the symbolic resolutions of political struggles’ (Palat 2000, 129; emphasis in original).

Tariq Jazeel (2017) notes that the postcolonial has developed its own disciplinary canon in the Western academy in a way that decolonial thinking has not and cannot, given its critique of establishment structures like academia. All the more surprising, then, that since the Rhodes must Fall student movement spread to Oxford University from South Africa in 2016, this radical theoretical perspective has had some impact on British university campuses. It has led to demands that academics across the disciplinary spectrum decolonise their curricula, adopt anti-racist pedagogies in the classroom, and decentre the colonial legacy by challenging the intellectual ascendancy of modernity/coloniality to incorporate multiple perspectives. To be clear, this does not mean replacing Western canonical knowledge, but rather enriching it, contextualising it, and challenging it to withstand a range of new critiques, in the spirit of rigorous enquiry that defenders of rational modernity themselves hold dear. At the same time, however, the link between decolonial theory and pedagogic practice is not always clearly articulated or at the forefront of university initiatives, which rightly focus on implementing practical measures.

Relinquishing a claim to authoritative academic expertise also means ceding control over it (Singh 2018, 18). To delimit, ‘discover’ and explain according to disciplinary frameworks is to dominate a subject so, as one of the ‘10 Ds’ of decolonizing, Ndlovu-Gatsheni (2021, 884) lists ‘dedisciplining.’ This also extends to language; writing in vernacular languages is another key strategy for *Decolonizing the Mind* (Ngugi 1986). Decolonial scholars would also argue that the construction of national identity and the consolidation of nation-state borders are central facets of the coloniality of being and mind, which refer to how people identify and how they relate to others in the world, respectively. Indeed, coloniality, modernity and nationalism have been presented as a mutually reinforcing conceptual triad (Barlow 2012, 625). Demonstrating and dismantling enduring hierarchies between formerly colonised and colonising powers is part of ‘a deeper challenge to the colonial system of thinking’ (Sabaratnam 2011, 787). This serves to restore agency and make space for alternative perspectives by countering foundational myths of European civilisation’s exceptionalism and superiority over others, which are part and parcel of colonial modernity. Related to this is a critique of binary thinking, epitomised in the dichotomy between the civilised and ‘savage,’ which was central to justifying imperialism and *The White Man’s burden* (Kipling, 1899).

Decolonial theory encompasses a variety of approaches beyond the MCD movement to which Quijano and Mignolo belong. These range from Dipesh Chakrabarty’s *Provincialising Europe*, though Kuan-Hsing Chen’s *Asia as*

Method, to Prasenjit Duara's *Circulatory Histories* (Goh 2020). Though not explicitly decolonial, Heonik Kwon's *The Other Cold War* (2010) and Gavin Walker and Naoki Sakai (2019, 3) also argue that predefining areas of the globe as objects of study serves to reinscribe the Western gaze and hierarchies of knowledge, creating an intellectual separation between specialist and indigenous ways of knowing that cements the supposed superiority of Eurocentric, 'expert' approaches. It is precisely such theoretical and methodological presumptions that decolonial scholars seek to question, not only in terms of spatiality but also temporality. Decolonial methodologies are also attuned to the fact that field research can be actively harmful to its 'subjects' in reproducing hierarchies of knowledge and power, if the researcher is assumed to be an outside 'expert' looking in. As it is, the 'ways in which scientific research is implicated in the worst excesses of colonialism remains a powerful remembered history for many of the world's colonized peoples' (Smith 2021, 1).

Following Walter Dignolo, decoloniality involves recognising the 'intimacies' among continents, which Lisa Lowe (2015, 21) defines as 'the circuits, connections, associations, and mixings of differentially laboring peoples.' This also means unravelling received notions of chronological, linear time (Sutherland 2016b, 2020). Without idealising a precolonial past or creating new boundaries in place of those it breaks down, decolonising work should equally target 'native tyrannies and nationalist elites' (Gopal 2021, 10) as well as colonial rulers, and the collaboration between them. More positively, it should seek to reframe and retell history that incorporates different perspectives and make space for equal dialogue between them, highlighting the contribution of racialised and other minorities in creating Europe's cultural identity and the condition of global modernity. As Joseph Roach (1996, 6) points out, 'the relentless search for the purity of origins is a voyage not of discovery but of erasure.' Museums, long bastions of nationalist discourse, have an important role to play in presenting and disseminating decolonised histories to the wider public. They are also a colonial accretion (Sutherland 2010, 2017, 2020, 2022a).

Museums

The arch imperialist Rudyard Kipling's 1899 poem *The White Man's burden*, written in support of the United States' conquest of the Philippines in 1898, defined that burden as a self-imposed duty to bring Western civilisation to supposedly benighted peoples. At the same time, Native Americans in the United States were being offered the stark choice of

assimilation or cultural extermination (Mithlo 2004, 748). In a critical appropriation of the phrase in the context of museums, Nancy Marie Mithlo (2004, 748, emphasis in original) defined the 'Red Man's Burden' as 'the suggestion that Native American museum professionals have a *responsibility* to literally sort through [...] colonial legacies via museum collections.' This points to the unreflective assumption that minoritised people should, by definition, do most of the decolonising work. They may be 'given' a voice, but this is perceived as a mark of generosity, not equality, and is 'offered' on the dominant majority's own terms. It exemplifies what Paul Gilroy (1993, 3) called 'cultural insiderism,' a putative national unity and ethnic homogeneity that invokes 'ethnicity a second time in the hermeneutic procedures deployed to make sense of its distinctive cultural content'.

Museums are a product of Western civilisation. Descended from the cabinets of curiosities amassed by learned and wealthy Europeans, they were imposed or adopted across the world and thus form part of postcolonial legacies playing out today. Often imbued with an aura of authority and considered sanctuaries of knowledge, beauty and precious artefacts, museums embody a certain perspective on the world. They are entrusted with discerning what is valuable and worth preserving as heritage, and creating the narratives that interpret and give meaning to the objects in their care. Museums are thus remarkably powerful, and hence political, institutions that tell people what should be important to their lives and considered central to their understanding of history, beauty and memory. That is why this book uses museums to help explore and represent the consequences of colonial modernity.

Politics is partly about getting people to do what they would not otherwise do. It is about governments and economies and trade and defence, but also, just as importantly, about who gets to rule over others and why. Politics is manifest everywhere in society, from the micro-politics of a school classroom, through the interpretation strategies of a municipal museum, to the organising principles of our world order. Politics is also about class, race, ethnicity, nationalism, disability, neurodiversity, gender, sexuality, belief, ideology and the myriad identifiers that distinguish those who 'belong' from those who do not. In turn, belonging to a powerful group tends to bestow privilege, security, confidence and an appetite for risk that can entrench and perpetuate power. Like so many shipping crates full of fascinating artefacts, museums can serve to unpack and make sense of these societal currents.

Individual museums are keepers of a particular, generally secular, flame. They translate and hopefully respond to evolving understandings of their specialist area for a target audience and in pursuit of a specific purpose, whether that be national primacy, historical appreciation or scientific discovery. Audiences can range from impressionable young schoolchildren, through passing locals and tourists, to professional experts and lay aficionados. Museums tend to be a dominant presence in a given cultural landscape and span the gamut from daringly innovative to stolidly traditional. In many cases, they benefit from national subsidies or philanthropic gifts as a partial contribution to running costs, but are nonetheless dependent on attracting visitors for survival. As such, museums are strange creatures, deemed culturally important and necessary even when seldom visited, but open to criticism if considered too commercial. In some instances, their collections and exhibits may court scandal and give rise to deeply painful conflicts around their purpose and property, while being held up as paragons of authoritative, dominant narratives elsewhere. Behind it all are people, with their own curatorial priorities and constraints, seeking to square limited resources with competing demands (Eckersley and Vos 2023).

Museum exhibits can be considered as artefacts of broader nation-state debates. In turn, decolonising museum practice involves exploring how exhibitions may be informed by and inflected with racialised national and imperial categories (Tolia-Kelly & Raymond 2020, 2). Paying attention to omissions and elisions helps us to understand the extent to which museums and heritage sites distil and reflect ongoing debates around national belonging and racism. Studying museum discourse ‘like a text for its narrative structure and strategies’ (Mason 2011, 26) is not limited to written text, but can include spatial ordering, lighting, choice of artefacts and multimedia, among other exhibition techniques. Discourse can also be marked by absence, ‘grounded in silence, ignorance and various modes of cultural censorship and repression’ (Dobie 2010, xi). For example, wholesale condemnation of so-called ‘identity politics’ is dismissive, not creative, and thereby serves to perpetuate existing power hierarchies and preserve the status quo. It is a failure of imagination not to interrogate existing political identities and to think about alternative ways of being in the world; ‘To recognise one’s own role in the oppression of others is not about blame but about opening our eyes to how power works and how we can redirect it so that it doesn’t diminish us all’ (Jackson 2012, 38). The next section considers creative ways of rethinking power dynamics through oceanic perspectives.

Oceanic thinking

As we have seen, decolonising something other than a territory denotes a fundamental process of challenging the colonial basis of modern knowledge and the institutions that gave rise to systemic racism. In this context, decolonisation is understood as ‘an act of thinking, of imagination. It means dreaming up a political community that undoes the organic link between state and nation that has gelled over the past five centuries’ (Mamdani 2020, 334). We have also seen that ‘delinking’ from modernity’s universalising claims favours a ‘pluriverse’ of perspectives, of which oceanic thinking is one example (Mignolo 2013, 4; Sutherland 2022a, 2023). Seaborne perspectives are a way of approaching belonging that highlights cross-cutting currents of transatlantic slavery, colonial conquest and contemporary xenophobia and racism. Oceanic thinking can also draw attention to warming waters, rising seas and marine pollution alongside conversations about human solidarity and ‘Othering.’ The climate emergency is raising public awareness that seas and oceans are not an Other ‘over there’, but an essential element deeply imbricated in future human survival. For example, connecting the lived reality of ocean pollution with racial inequality can show how poverty and discrimination are manifest in exposure to plastic waste and lack of access to clean water. Applied to museums, taking watery mobility as a starting point can provide visitors with a range of tools to critically analyse maritime and colonial histories and their enduring legacies.

Inspired by the movement of the sea itself, oceanic thinking is premised on a fluid, borderless approach to history and politics that stands in conscious opposition to nation-state boundaries and static identities. Oceanic thinking offers one way of stepping outside ethnonational frameworks and approaching belonging differently, independently of debates around identity politics. Focusing on watery mobility foregrounds the circulation of people, ideas and commodities, including human cargo, the colonial connections that once fuelled and financed maritime transport, and their legacy. It disrupts dominant nationalist narratives and includes a broader range of perspectives on colonial modernity aimed at bringing new sources of solidarity, learning and understanding to the surface (Linebaugh and Rediker 2000). Seaborne mobility can inspire a decolonial socio-political analysis freed from the strictures of territorial, national frameworks that are frequently suffused with racialised assumptions. In other words, oceanic thinking can help us see politics and society anew.

Matt Matsuda (2006, 761) highlights the need for an “Oceanic” vision to match’ longstanding Eurocentrism in a way that engages with different ways of ‘doing’ history. Similarly, Kim Peters and Phil Steinberg (2019) theorise the sea’s power as an alternative to land-based imaginaries. In contrast to nationalist narratives premised on rootedness in space and chronological longevity across time (Sutherland 2020), a focus on the sea as one of many ‘water worlds’ (Barnes and Alatout 2012) ‘is a response to the materiality of water and a call to follow the water’ (Bear and Bull 2011, 2265). Bringing these literatures into conversation with one another helps develop a political imaginary that channels ‘the representational potential of the unbounded ocean’ (Remmington 2016, 82). Oceanic spacetime holds the promise of other ways of thinking and being, in contrast to rigid ‘grids of empire’ and their traumatic legacy (Cooppan 2019, 397). Rather than start from the two-dimensional political cartography of neatly enclosed nation-states, oceanic thinking takes the sea as a metaphor for fluid, dynamic political identities, relations and actions. But the sea is much more than just a metaphor. The Atlantic Ocean, for example, is a place of belonging, a site of injustice, and an experience in itself (Gilroy 1993). It is a place of memory and ghostly hauntings, in that Black ‘lives are always swept up in the wake produced and determined, though not absolutely, by the afterlives of slavery’ and empire (Sharpe 2016, 8).

In *A History of Water*, Edward Wilson-Lee (2022) takes us back to the sixteenth century and the foundations of colonial modernity, comparing the lives and work of Portuguese philosopher, courtier and chronicler Damião de Góis with the man who would become Portugal’s national poet, Luis de Camões. As their respective peregrinations across Europe, Africa and Asia unfolded, the men came to embody contrasting responses to the differences in thought, culture and spiritual life they encountered. Portugal had led the way in developing Europe’s commerce and conquest, and soon found itself at a crossroads in deciding how to evaluate and classify the new knowledge it encountered. Damião de Góis was fascinated by cultural difference, his curiosity ranging from the Scandinavian Sami to Ethiopian Christianity, but he was ultimately accused of fraternising with Protestants during his travels and persecuted by the Catholic inquisition. Meanwhile, Luis de Camões experienced poverty, setbacks, and spells in prison during his life, but was posthumously celebrated as a literary giant for his epic poem, the *Lusiads*.

The genius of Camões lay in reinterpreting Portuguese traders and adventurers as heroic explorers, creating a classically-inspired national myth full of exploits and discoveries, at the same time as drawing a veil over widespread violence, exploitative practices and unsavoury characters.

Camões' work also masked the confusion Portuguese merchants and missionaries themselves must have felt when faced with the sophistication and strangeness of new ways of living and worshipping. Ultimately, casting aside any doubts about Catholic beliefs in self-denial and sin, and affirming the superiority of mankind over all beasts was more reassuring than entertaining thoughts of other approaches to life. Rather than question European perspectives, it was easier to believe they were right and, eventually, superior (Wilson-Lee 2022, 254).

Wilson-Lee evokes an early fork in the road, when the narrative link between Renaissance Europe and Classical Antiquity was created and Eurocentrism first established. And yet, the life of Damião de Góis demonstrates that this was indeed a choice, and that fixity and cultural hierarchy need not provide the fundamentals of history, even though at the time this possibility was deemed so destabilising as to be sacrilegious.

The idea that flux had a significance of its own and was not just a foil to set off the perfections of that which was eternally fixed, threatened to erode the foundations of how the world was understood, putting in its place a history which could not be divided into regions and periods, a history like water, before which all existing structures might be swept away with their attendant beliefs (Wilson-Lee 2022, 220).

Oceanic thinking offers a way of approaching 'history like water.' Camões himself described the dizzying, disorienting feeling of being shipwrecked off the Mekong delta, but his epic poem did not take that as a point of departure to compare the local Khmer or Cham accounts of navigating those seas with his own. Instead, it offered a Manichean vision of virtue, Christian piety and national pride in opposition to those strangers, soon to be labelled uncivilised barbarians. That vision would provide the blueprint for centuries of Eurocentric cultural and historical production (Wilson-Lee 2022, 202). Half a millennium on, it is high time to revisit the notion of a history like water.

A history like water has both spatial and temporal dimensions. Let's take what water has to teach us about time; be it the residence time of organic matter, ship time or oceanic time, where past and present converge (Sharpe 2016, 41, 62, 128). Dionne Brand (2011, 25) describes the black experience across the Americas as a haunting; 'History is already seated in the chair in the empty room when one arrives.' Haunting telescopes time. A ghost represents 'both the past and a living presence [...] something that is and yet is not' (Trouillot 1995, 147). The past and present co-exist, thereby disrupting linear, chronological time as the basis of developmental history,

which views some peoples as more advanced and others as relatively backward (Chatterjee 2005). The lingering, racist sense that Africans and other colonised subjects '*ne sont pas suffisamment rentrés dans l'Histoire* [have not fully entered into history],' as France's then President Nicolas Sarkozy stated in a speech in Dakar in 2007, derives from an Enlightenment vision of humanity and progress that was not, in fact, inclusive (Sarkozy 2007). Official histories cement the silence, yet there remains 'a strand of stories which never come into being, which never coalesce' (Brand 2011, 29). Histories of slavery and indenture feel present and yet out of reach, beyond living memory, erased from schoolbooks and often hushed up in family lore (Bahadur 2013). Oceanic thinking pays attention to those silences.

In spatial terms, cartography is closely bound up with the cultural and political significance of ocean journeys. Carla Lois (2014, 29) traces the process by which the Atlantic Ocean was reimagined as a vertical axis, or 'backbone' of the Western world, when it had previously been depicted in a variety of more peripheral forms. This was a direct consequence of European colonialism. Now the dominant depiction of the world organised around the Atlantic, which is based on the sixteenth century Mercator projection, is a visual representation of Western-centric imaginaries and 'ontological imperialism' (Levinas, cited in Jackson 1995, 87). Alternative ways of seeing and representing the world were available at the dawn of colonial modernity, however, as noted both by Dionne Brand and Edward Wilson-Lee (2022). For instance, Brand (2011, 212) describes an oral ruttier as 'a long poem containing navigational instructions which sailors learned by heart and recited from memory. The poem contained the routes and tides, the stars and maybe the taste and flavours of the waters, the coolness, the saltiness; all for finding one's way at sea.' This is reminiscent of some Pacific Islanders' practice of wayfinding, which will be discussed in the following chapters. Oceanic thinking honours ways of 'living other-wise' (Shilliam 2015, 8).

Chapter one examines the concept of imperial sovereignty in British history and how it relates to the Vote Leave slogan of 'take back control' during the 2016 Brexit referendum campaign. It traces continuities between eighteenth century thinkers, nineteenth century debates on abolition, and current attitudes that are dismissive of Britain's imperial past. The chapter contends that there are links between historical, imperial racism and notions of sovereignty in Brexit Britain that evoke a narrow, racialized view of the 'people' as entitled to benefit from recovered sovereignty. Chapter two sets out the historical context of colonial modernity in more detail by focusing

on two of its constitutive concepts, namely racism and freedom. As the crucible for these aspects of political modernity, the chapter's empirical focus is the Caribbean and what became the United States of America, as part of a wider Atlantic world. England and then Britain played a leading role in these developments, as a sponsor to privateers, an early colonising power in the region, and a promoter of plantation economies and capitalist commerce.

Chapter three looks at decolonial approaches that challenge colonial modernity's categories, with an empirical focus on imperial othering in the Pacific. The chapter argues that oceanic thinking allows us to recognise the diversity and multiplicity of human experiences and histories, as well as connections and entanglements that transcend national borders and continental divides. It also suggests that a politics of fluidity enables us to question the fixed and essentialised identities and norms that colonial modernity imposes. Chapter four discusses concepts of nation, indigeneity, and community in relation to colonial modernity, exploring how nationalism and the concept of the 'native' as the archetypal Other were fundamental to imposing colonial modernity across the globe. It discusses how indigenous communities have resisted this imposition, and examines alternative ways of imagining community, such as community land trusts in the Scottish Highlands. The chapter argues that decolonising requires dismantling the logic of colonial modernity and rebuilding political structures according to different, more inclusive principles that are not based on racialised hierarchies between 'natives' and 'foreigners'.

Chapter five focuses on museums and monuments that engage with colonial modernity and its legacies, analysing how these cultural institutions represent and interpret aspects of colonial modernity and the extent to which they reproduce or challenge its categories and narratives. It considers selected museums in France, the Netherlands and Belgium as possible exemplars for a British Museum of Colonial Modernity that would encompass Greenwich, the Thames and Canary Wharf in London. The other case studies are La Rochelle's longstanding *Musée du Nouveau Monde* (New World Museum) alongside two more recent exhibits; the Amsterdam *Tropenmuseum's* permanent exhibition since 2021 entitled *Our Colonial Inheritance*, and the renovated Africa Museum's exhibitions in Tervuren, Belgium, reopened in 2018.

The book concludes that oceanic thinking opens up the possibility of stepping outside bounded identities and sovereign entities, and escaping from the conception of time as a linear chronology. These notions of space

and time have shaped the ‘historical script’ (Satia 2020, 247) of modernity and progress, the consequences of which we live with today. As corals die, pollutants suffocate and poison sealife, trawlers rake the ocean floor and water levels rise to the point of displacing whole populations, the sea’s very materiality demonstrates the price of progress. If we can think with the ‘Hypersea’ (Peters and Steinberg 2019), then we can look at the time and space in which Earth was turned into property—the era of colonial modernity—from different perspectives (Hall 2010). We can step outside linear time and bounded space to explore other ways of being and belonging. In other words, we can decolonise our thinking about political modernity.

CHAPTER 1

‘TAKING BACK CONTROL’: TRACING IMPERIAL SOVEREIGNTY TO BREXIT BRITAIN

On February 3rd 2020, flush from winning a large electoral majority at the 2019 UK general election, days after the country officially left the European Union (EU), and just before the Covid pandemic struck, Britain's then Prime Minister Boris Johnson (2020) made a speech to European business leaders and diplomats (which was also made available in German). Speaking from the Old Royal Naval College in Greenwich, he laid out his vision for Britain's new role in the world by linking his country's eighteenth-century fortunes to the present day. Johnson (2020, online) began his speech by describing at some length the ceiling painting of King William and Queen Mary above him, entitled the 'Triumph of Liberty and Peace over Tyranny' and executed from 1708-12 by James Thornhill, before interpreting it in the context of the 1707 Act of Union between Scotland and England:

So this is it. This is the newly forged United Kingdom on the slipway: this is the moment when it all took off. And-you know where this is going-today if we get it right, if we have the courage to follow the instincts and the instructions of the British people, this can be another such moment on the launching pad. Because once again we have settled a long-running question of sovereign authority, we have ended a debate that has run for three and a half years-some would say 47 years. I won't even mention the name of the controversy except to say that it begins with B.

Clearly suggesting another parallel between then and now, Johnson (2020, online) asks of the painting; 'Does it not speak of supreme national self-confidence?'

The British monarchs' supposed embodiment of peace and liberty in the painting omits the fact that throughout the eighteenth century, the British slave trade was fuelling what Johnson (2020, online) characterises as 'stability and certainty and optimism and an explosion of global trade

propelled by new maritime technology.’ Nor did Johnson acknowledge that trading partners were not always free to accept or reject British terms, as in the long-standing, illegal imports of opium from British India to China that culminated in the Opium Wars of the mid-nineteenth century. Instead, Johnson made a spirited case that ‘full sovereign control over our borders and immigration’ would help galvanise free trade and prosperity for Britain and its partners without the need for any new treaties or institutions (Johnson 2020, online). Standing behind a lectern bearing the words ‘Unleashing Britain’s potential,’ Johnson appeared to place the executive at the vanguard of an ‘unleashed’ global Britain and made no mention of parliament or parliamentary sovereignty. He also had the delicacy not to point out that in Thornhill’s painting, the protestant King William is actually standing on a prostrate, chastened Louis XIV of France to symbolise Britain’s triumph over his absolutist regime and the tyranny of the title. Elsewhere in the painting, a winged figure of victory brandishing the French *fleur de lys* loads enemy spoils onto a large man of war embodying Britain’s growing maritime strength (Old Royal Naval College 2022). Johnson’s self-congratulatory tone mirrors Thornhill’s depiction of early imperial Britain, emphasising the need for a decolonial reading of both periods and their parallels.

During the June 2016 referendum campaign on whether the UK should leave or remain in the EU, a process universally known as Brexit, the Vote Leave campaign’s ubiquitous slogan of ‘Take back control’ was widely considered key to its success. The 51.9% vote to leave eventually resulted in the UK exiting the EU in January 2020, with a transition period ending a year later. Rather than the pursuit of parliamentary sovereignty with which it was most often associated during the Brexit campaign, this chapter argues that the ‘sovereign authority’ to which Johnson was referring in his speech was an executive-led, imperially inspired and thus racialised construct. That is to say, the racial hierarchies that colonising countries developed to justify plantation slavery across the Americas were ‘among the first and most durable products of territorial expropriation’ (Gilroy 2004, 56). This also applied to later imperial expansion across Africa, Asia and the Middle East. Their legacies will continue to resonate down the decades until we ‘conjure up a future in which black and brown Europeans stop being seen as migrants’ (Gilroy 2004, 165; Balkenhol and Modest 2019). Vote Leave’s vision of sovereignty was actually a figment of and a fillip to imperial nostalgia. It embodied the ‘melancholia’ that Paul Gilroy (2004) presciently diagnosed and denounced in his book *After Empire*.

Nostalgia denotes a longing for an idealised time or place (Boym 2007). Much like the word ‘again’ in Donald Trump’s 2016 presidential campaign slogan ‘Make America great again,’ the word ‘back’ in ‘take back control’ suggests the recovery of something lost, such as ‘nostalgia for a time when populations were – supposedly – still homogeneous’ (Duyvendak 2011, 2). Reasserting control over state borders, or a sense of national greatness, necessarily harks back to earlier, implicitly halcyon times. During the Brexit referendum campaign, the Vote Leave camp strongly associated taking back control with restoring national sovereignty, which was generally understood to mean parliamentary sovereignty over the passing of legislation. Right up until the final phase of the Brexit negotiations in December 2020, cabinet ministers like then business secretary Alok Sharma, among others, emphasised that ‘we want the EU to recognise that the UK is a sovereign and independent nation’ (BBC News 2020). No longer would the UK have EU regulations and directives imposed upon it, nor would UK representatives find themselves outvoted on the Council of Ministers or lost among European Parliament members from twenty-seven other states.

The UK government’s focus on parliamentary sovereignty switched to executive leadership after the prominent ‘Brexiteer’ Boris Johnson became UK Prime Minister in July 2019. Closely assisted by his special adviser Dominic Cummings, who was also Vote Leave’s campaign manager and the man credited with coining the slogan ‘Take back Control’ (Russell and James 2020), the trend was most evident in the government’s prorogation of parliament prior to the passing of Brexit legislation in late 2019. This move was widely seen to be a political move to stop parliament scrutinising that legislation and was judged illegal by the UK Supreme Court, which enabled parliamentary sittings to resume (Feldman 2020). The UK parliament also appeared to play a relatively subordinate role to the executive during the 2020-21 Covid crisis, as repeatedly pointed out by the House of Commons speaker, Sir Lindsay Hoyle (Politics Home 2020). Although Cummings’ campaigning skills were widely recognised, his abrasive and iconoclastic style were ultimately deemed ill-suited to the business of government. This contributed to his departure from number 10 Downing Street in November 2020, although his influence lived on in the reforms initiated under Boris Johnson’s premiership (Economist 2020).

This chapter takes the long view of British sovereignty in order to unpick the connotations and implications underlying the slogan ‘Take back control’. The first section considers imperial sovereignty as the wellspring of debates around sovereignty’s indivisibility, highlighting how this ideal has never been achieved in practice. Internal and external sovereignty are

commonly defined as state control within territorial borders and broad international recognition of that control, respectively. Despite the ever-increasing anachronism of internal sovereignty in an interdependent, globalised world, the ‘Take back control’ slogan nevertheless evokes the symbolic, ideal certainty of ‘absolute sovereignty, complete with its connotations of autarchy’ (Sutherland 2012, 104). The second section examines the construct of national sovereignty against this background. Boris Johnson’s government, which enjoyed a large parliamentary majority following the December 2019 UK General Election, was a proponent of national exceptionalism and the benefits of unalloyed state sovereignty, not least throughout the Covid crisis. The final section explores ways in which the connotations of ‘Take Back Control’ translate to a racialised understanding of post-Brexit sovereignty (El Enani 2020, 31). The chapter concludes that the slogan’s initial vagueness, which was key to its appeal, should now be understood with chilling clarity in light of the UK government’s response to Covid-19 and to accusations of flouting parliamentary standards. Tracing its connection to imperial sovereignty also highlights the racialised elements of Empire that have endured, thereby linking it to Black Lives Matter protests following the murder of George Floyd at the hands of Derek Chauvin in Minneapolis, Minnesota, on May 25th 2020.

Imperial Sovereignty

Alongside the distinction between internal and external sovereignty outlined in the introduction, sovereignty can also be defined as either the untrammelled political power of the monarch or state, or in terms of popular sovereignty. Its conceptual origins are often traced to the philosophers Jean Bodin (1530-96) and Thomas Hobbes (1588-1679). Later, the philosopher Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1712-88) introduced the association between freedom and sovereignty. This was put into practice by twentieth century anticolonial movements, even as states’ practical capacity to exercise sovereignty became increasingly constrained by globalisation. Joan Cocks (2014, 34) asks;

What does it mean to dream of sovereign power as Bodin and Hobbes understand the term, given that it does not mean to dream of sovereign freedom? It could mean to wish to possess such superiority of will over all other human wills that one can impose on them one’s vision, whether divinely inspired or not, of a just and peaceable social order (and how many of us have not had that fantasy from time to time!). Alternatively, it could

mean to wish to inhabit a just and peaceable social order, compliments of someone else's superior will.

Although popular sovereignty is often defined as the general will, Cocks (2014, 57) points out that the common interest it evokes is not always the same as having the people or their representatives actually wield power. Conversely, power wielded in the name of the general will does not always reflect it, particularly when some groups remain voiceless, or are rendered voiceless as part of establishing sovereignty. For example, Britain's colonial settlement of the United States, India and Australia were all instances in which the native inhabitants' right to enjoy their lands was usurped and replaced with a notion of imperial sovereignty. Nevertheless, popular sovereignty continues to be held up as an ideal type to be lauded and defended, while drawing a veil over its associations with the violence of imposed, imperial sovereignty.

In practice, Britain's exercise of imperial sovereignty over several centuries was messy, layered, fragmented, uneven, variable and hierarchical, whereas Hobbes' and Bodin's visions were 'more prescription than description' (Stern 2011, 9). Some entrepreneurial actors sought to curry favour by advancing imperial interests informally, while others enjoyed officially delegated legal powers from London; 'sovereignty in empire splintered as multiple agents positioned themselves to act as proxies for imperial powers, and as subject polities and populations negotiated scope for their own autonomy' (Benton 2007, 54; see also Stoler 2006). The legal fiction of sovereignty was also stretched to cover the East India Company's profit-seeking conquests. These coexisted with and increasingly usurped existing legal systems throughout the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, until Queen Victoria claimed India for the British crown (Dirks 2007, 327). In August 1765, the defeated Mughal Emperor Shah Alam was subject to what William Dalrymple (2020, xxx) terms 'an act of involuntary privatisation,' which subcontracted his revenue-raising powers to the East India Company and its own private army. This was a turning point, which the rapacious Governor of Bengal Robert Clive described in terms of sovereignty; 'Can it be doubted that a large Army of Europeans would effectually preserve to us the Sovereignty, as I may call it, not only by keeping in awe the ambition of any Country Prince, but by rending us so truly formidable, that no French, Dutch or other Enemy could dare to molest us?' (Clive cited in Dalrymple 2020, 206). In practice, this meant that the administration of law, justice and the treasury, and the regulation of civic life, diplomacy and war constituted a form of 'corporate sovereignty' which drew its legitimacy flexibly from different legal traditions (Stern 2011, 4, 13; Dalrymple 2020, 209). Within